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October 26th: 2 Chronicles 26 & Acts 4:32–5:11

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Uzziah's rise and fall. Ananias and Sapphira.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

2 Chronicles 26 1 Now Uzziah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And when he became angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead in the presence of the priests in the house of the Lord, by the altar of incense.

2 And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him. And behold, he was leprous in his forehead. And they rushed him out quickly, and he himself hurried to go out, because the Lord had struck him.

3 And King Uzziah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper lived in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord. 4 And Jotham his son was over the king's household, governing the people of the land. 5 Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote.

6 And Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the burial

field that belonged to the kings. For they said, He is a leper. And Jotham his son reigned in his place.

While we read of Azariah the son of Amaziah in chapters 14 and 15 of 2 Kings, the treatment of him in those chapters is, considering the length and the relative success of his reign, surprisingly fairly cursory. We do, however, read a lot more concerning him in 2 Chronicles 26. He is referred to as Uzziah rather than Azariah in the book of 2 Chronicles, although he is also called Uzziah on a few occasions in 2 Kings 15.

Uzziah's father Amaziah had suffered a terrible defeat at the hands of the Israelite king Jehoash, who had broken down the walls of Jerusalem, raided the treasuries of the temple and the king's palace, taken hostages back with him to Samaria, and placed Judah under his sway, perhaps even to the extent of temporarily uniting Judah and Israel, the northern and the southern kingdoms, under his rule. Amaziah was killed in a conspiracy. Uzziah became king as a teenager.

And we could be forgiven for thinking that Uzziah's rule would have little chance of succeeding. However, under Uzziah the kingdom of Judah flourished. He was the second longest reigning king of Judah, after Manasseh, and he reigned longer than any northern king.

He won several significant military victories. He fortified the city of Jerusalem. He rebuilt and strengthened the walls that had been broken down under his father.

The boundaries of the nation greatly extended. He restored Judah's access to the highly strategic Gulf of Aqaba, which had been of great importance for Solomon's wealth and power, building Eilat. Having access to this port would have opened up an immensely valuable realm of international trade.

As Sarah Jafet observes, reading the narratives of Jehoshaphat, Jehoram, and Amaziah, we may get a sense of how important gaining control of this port was for the Judean kings. Without this port, the Red Sea trade would be closed to them. Uzziah was a good king who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

His father and his grandfather, Amaziah and Joash, had been righteous kings most of their days, and Uzziah largely follows in their footsteps in this regard. We might speculate about the identity of Zechariah. This man instructed Uzziah and seems to have been a cause of his faithfulness.

It is most likely that he was a priest, rather like Jehoiada, who had taught Joash, Uzziah's grandfather. As in the case of Joash, as long as his instructor lives, he is faithful. However, when the instructor dies, the impression is given that he falls from his form of faithfulness.

In both Joash and Uzziah's situations, they may have failed to grow to the point of being

mature enough in their characters to be able to pursue faithfulness when they lacked a close counselor to encourage, support and direct them. While Uzziah sought the Lord, the Lord also made him to prosper. Nevertheless, although he was faithful for much of his reign, like Joash's grandfather, the end of his reign was marked by serious sin.

So few of the faithful kings of Judah were able to end their reigns well. The latter parts of their reigns were so often marred by unfaithfulness and its consequences. Uzziah achieved very significant military victories over the Philistines.

The wall of Jerusalem had been broken down under the reign of Amaziah, his father, but now his son is breaking down the walls of other cities, the cities of the Philistines. He also builds cities within the territory of the Philistines. The Philistines are to the west of Judah, and gaining power over the Philistines would also likely have given Uzziah access to the Mediterranean.

He also gains dominance over the Mennonites to the south and the Ammonites to the northeast. Uzziah is so extremely successful that his influence and reputation spreads even to the border of Egypt, an influence reminiscent of that which Solomon enjoyed. In speaking of Uzziah's fame, the text might imply that he was beginning to enjoy some stature as a figure on the international stage of the wider region.

Uzziah's rebuilding and fortifying of the walls of Jerusalem suggests that Judah is no longer under the dominance of Israel and is free to re-establish its defences, the defences that have been broken down under the reign of Amaziah, without interference from the north. He not only fortifies the walls of Jerusalem, he builds towers to defend the broader territory from invaders and raiders. This securing of the territory of Judah permits agricultural expansion, also served by Uzziah's attention to the provision of water in the wilderness.

Like David and Solomon, Uzziah is a king who is attentive to the land, which flourishes under his rule. The people were not merely to control the land, they were to put down deep roots into it, and the development of Judah's agriculture under Uzziah was one way in which this was achieved. Besides building defences, Uzziah greatly strengthens Judah's army, they are well ordered, well equipped, and his men also invent ingenious new weaponry, enabling his fame to reach zenith.

However, at this point, Uzziah commits a sin, at the very height of his power, lifted up by his pride he presumptuously attempted to burn incense to the Lord, an act that was restricted to the appointed priests, we might recall the sins of Nadab and Abihu, or of the rebels and Korah's rebellion. Azariah, his namesake, goes in after him with 80 priests, 80 priests who had been charged presumably to guard the temple. They courageously withstand King Uzziah, who insists on going further, angry that they would prevent him.

Uzziah might believe that he is serving the Lord, that he is bringing glory to God by

offering this incense, but in fact he is breaking the explicit word of God, and he should know better. His action is driven not by humility towards God, but by pride, his heart is lifted up, and so he believes that he can take this prerogative that belongs to the priests alone, and assume it as his own as the king. While he's still in the confrontation with the priests, leprosy breaks out on his forehead.

The forehead was the place where the high priest bore the mark that he was holy to the Lord, and now God had placed the mark of a curse upon Uzziah. Leprosy on various occasions in scripture is associated with God striking of someone, it's a sort of plague, it's referred to in language reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt in chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Leviticus. Miriam was struck with leprosy in chapter 12 of the book of Numbers, when she spoke against Moses with Aaron.

Gehazi the servant of Elisha was struck with leprosy in 2nd Kings chapter 5, after he lied to Naaman and also to his master Elisha. Much as in the book of Daniel as a result of his pride Nebuchadnezzar was brought low and made like a beast and driven out from among men, King Uzziah is driven out as a result of his leprosy, driven out of the temple, but also driven out of his palace. He has to live as a leper in a separate house.

He's excluded from the house of the Lord which included the palace complex. While the king usually lived in part of the house of the Lord as the servant and the son of the king, now he no longer has access to even that. Jotham his son has to take on the administration of many of the affairs of the realm as a result of this.

We are told that the rest of his works were recorded by the prophet Isaiah, who as we see here and also in the case of Hezekiah wrote not only prophecy but history. The reference to Isaiah here is an important reminder that many of the ministries of the prophets both minor and major were taking place alongside these kings that we are reading about. Isaiah, Hosea and Amos all prophesied during the reign of Uzziah.

Indeed the great temple vision of Isaiah in chapter 6 of his prophecy is dated to the year of King Uzziah's death. The prophecies of Zechariah and Amos also refer to an important event that occurred in the reign of a great earthquake that struck Judah. A question to consider, in the story of King Uzziah we see faithful priests setting limits upon the rights and the actions of the king.

How can this help us better to understand the relationship between the ministries of priests, kings and prophets and how these different roles place limits upon and exercise certain forms of authority over each other? Acts chapter 4 verse 32 to chapter 5 verse 11. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

There was not a needy person among them for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph who was also called by the apostles Barnabas, which means son of encouragement, a Levite a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet. But a man named Ananias with his wife Sapphira sold a piece of property and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles feet.

But Peter said, Ananias why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold did it not remain your own? And after it was sold was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God. When Ananias heard these words he fell down and breathed his last and great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours his wife came in not knowing what had happened and Peter said to her tell me whether you sold the land for so much and she said yes for so much. But Peter said to her how is it that you have agreed together to test the spirit of the Lord? Behold the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door and they will carry you out. Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last.

When the young men came in they found her dead and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things. In Acts chapter 4 and 5 we read another episode in the life of the early church in Jerusalem.

We learn more of the behaviour of the early church in providing for those with need and also of the sin and the punishment of Ananias and Sapphira. What stands out in the early church in Jerusalem is the intensity of the unity of the community. They are of one heart and one soul.

They don't even treat their possessions as their own but hold things in common. As we read further on it seems clear that they were not required to donate their possessions to become part of the church. Rather this was something that they voluntarily did.

In some cases it would involve selling and giving the proceeds. In other cases it would mean putting things at the disposal of the church. All of this is a result of the fact that they feel so bound up with each other, being one heart and one soul, that they don't withhold anything from each other.

The benefit of the other is the benefit of oneself. In this practice we can also see something of the practical import of the commandment to love your neighbour as

yourself. If you love your neighbour as yourself you will not withhold from him and his need what you would not withhold from yourself.

His good is not set over against or detached from your good. As he rejoices you rejoice. As he mourns you mourn.

The practice here might relate to what Roman Catholics have called the universal destination of goods. The fact that God has given the world to all humanity in common, private property is appropriate and a form of stewardship but it does not ultimately undermine the fact that God intended the creation for all of his creatures. This can also be related to the church's spiritual ministry.

The one united gift of the Holy Spirit has been given to the entire church at Pentecost. However that one gift is ministered in a great many different ways through the stewardship of the spiritual gifts that have been given to each one of us as individual members of the body of Christ. In the same way we have all been given some stewardship in the common gift of the one creation that God has given to all of his creatures and we will give an account of our stewardship whether more or less has been given into our charge.

We will have to answer for whether we have served others and glorify God with what he has given us or whether we have used it merely for our own selfish gain. Having a personal stewardship in the form of private property is a very good thing. It enables us both to enter into a fuller enjoyment for ourselves, a greater sense of God's gift as it relates to us and also to serve others and to bless others with what has been committed to our charge.

In Acts chapter 4 and 5 we have a sense of both aspects of this. It is important that people love their neighbours as themselves with their expression of the gifts that God has given to them. On the other hand it is important that these things are not just taken from people.

People can actually express these things as a true gift of themselves. In this way God makes us participants in his giving process. As we give to others what God has given into our stewardship we share in God's own generous giving.

No one requires Ananias or Sapphira or Barnabas to sell their property. They do it of their own free will. But as they act freely in this sort of way they're expressing something about the way the world really ought to be.

A world where the rich do not get rich on the back of the poor but where the needs of all people are met and every single person knows something of the goodness and the grace of God and his generous giving. This was the vision set forth in the Old Testament and in the practice of the early church we should see something of a restored Israel. Thinking

back to chapter 1 of the book we should recall the way that the numbers of people associated with the church serve to evoke the memory of Israel and the idea of the restoration of Israel.

This is the core of a restored Israel. A sign of what Israel more generally could receive if they accepted the Messiah Jesus and had the times of refreshing from God come upon them. This description of what Israel really ought to be can be found in places such as Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 1 to 11.

And you shall rule over many nations but they shall not rule over you. If among you one of your brothers should become poor in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say the seventh year the year of release is near and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother and you give him nothing and he cried to the Lord against you and you be guilty of sin.

You shall give to him freely and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor in your land.

The meeting of all the needs of the poor in the community then would have been a sign of God's presence within the community and a sign of the community's faithfulness that was fulfilling the purpose of the law. Laying money at the apostles' feet for them to distribute among the community was also a way of devoting things to the Lord. Back in Exodus the people donated to the building of the tabernacle voluntary gifts that were brought forward that expressed the people's heart in the very materials of the building.

Now God is building a new building and these voluntary gifts are part of what will build it up, a building made of people. They are also a new family. As families hold things in common, people do have their private property but it is not held over against other people as something that will not be shared.

If there is ever any need, the property of an individual person within the family will be shared with the others. Individuals like Mary the mother of Mark may continue to have large houses in Jerusalem but they don't treat those houses as if they were purely their own to use as they wanted. Rather they want to use them for the benefit and the building up of God's people.

At this point we are introduced to a character who provides an instance of this practice, an exemplary character called Barnabas. As Luke does elsewhere, he introduces this character as a minor one first before he will become a major one later on in the story. He

does the same with the character of Saul a few chapters later.

Joseph, called Barnabas, is a Jew, a Levite, from Cyprus. Cyprus would become a key location later on in the story. In chapter 11 men of Cyprus spoke to the Hellenists in Antioch which then became a base for the Gentile mission.

One of the prophets or teachers mentioned of the church in Antioch in chapter 13 verse 1 is Barnabas. It seems likely that he is one of the men who went from Cyprus at that point in chapter 11. Selling property to give to the needs of the church was a means of laying up treasure in heaven.

The early Jerusalem church was taking properties that would soon be quite depreciated in value after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, selling them and using them for something that would endure for eternity. They were also taking an approach to their money and possessions that was truly remarkable. The love of money has destroyed many unwary souls and we will see in the example of Ananias and Sapphira two such examples.

Later on Simon the sorcerer will try and buy the power of the Holy Spirit from Peter and will be judged as a result. The selling of fields and possessions and using of the proceeds to build up the body of Christ is exactly the opposite of what Judas, who by love of money had been led to betray his master, had done back in chapter 1. Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out and it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem so that the field was called in their own language Akkeldamah, that is, field of blood. Judas had sold his master's body, taken the money which had then been thrown at the feet of those who had taken his life, and then that money was used to buy a field.

This is the exact opposite of the actions of Barnabas and others, who are taking the money of fields that they have sold to build up the body that Judas sold to be crucified. Barnabas is named Joseph. Barnabas may be a nickname playing upon the meaning son of prophet.

Here it is connected with the meaning son of encouragement. Barnabas in his faithfulness is juxtaposed with the characters of Ananias and Sapphira in the chapter that follows. Luke often has husband-wife or male-female pairings and Ananias and Sapphira are a negative example of one of these.

At first Ananias and Sapphira's action looks very similar to that of Barnabas. They sell a piece of property with the intention of laying the money at the apostles' feet. However, they only intend to lay part of the money.

They secretly withhold some of the money for themselves. It is important to consider such gifts against the backdrop of the Old Testament commandments concerning

devoted things and vows. In Leviticus chapter 27 there is extensive treatment of devoted things.

In verse 28, for instance, What Ananias and Sapphira are doing then is devoting something, the proceeds of the item that they have sold, to the Lord, and then withholding some of that for themselves. But having devoted that to the Lord, they are both lying to the Lord and they are stealing from the Lord. Both of those things are very serious offences.

The vow aspect of this can be seen in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 13-14, which although it speaks about the tithe of the third year, can give us a sense of the vow character of devoting something to the Lord. After Ananias lays the money at Peter's feet, Peter challenges him, declaring that Satan has filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. Perhaps we should here recall Satan entering into Judas' heart back in the Gospels when he betrayed Christ.

Peter goes on to give a clearer sense of where the offence lay. It was not in the fact that the possessions were demanded by the Lord. If he had not vowed his possession to the Lord, he would have been able to keep it and he could have used it as he wanted.

If he had sold the property, he would still have been free to dispose of that money as he wanted. It was only when he devoted it to the Lord, lying to the Lord and stealing from the Lord, that the judgment came upon him. Peter makes clear he has lied not to man but to God.

Connecting this to the claim that he lied to the Holy Spirit, we might see some proof of the Holy Spirit's divinity. He is immediately struck down dead. This is not something that happens that often in scripture.

We might connect this with the judgment upon the rebels of Korah. There are also similarities with the sin of Rechab and Bayanah, presenting the head of Ish-bosheth to David, thinking that they will be approved when they are actually put to death for their actions and the young men take them out and bury them. There are similarities with the sin of Achan.

Achan was put to death because he took of the devoted things and Ananias and Sapphira are doing something similar. A further example would be Nadab and Abihu, who presumed to offer strange fire to the Lord, fire that had not been required. This occurs just after the worship of the tabernacle has been established.

They are killed by the Lord and fear comes upon the people. The same sort of thing happens here. After judgment fell upon Ananias, three hours later Sapphira came.

From Sapphira's name, scholars surmise that she might have been a wealthy woman in Jerusalem. Peter gives her a chance to depart from the sin of her husband, but she

confirms it. Consequently, she is struck down just as her husband was.

The result of all of this is that a godly fear falls upon the church and the people round about. They can see that God's presence is among the disciples and they have a clearer sense of the seriousness of sin. A question to consider.

How would you describe the role that Peter and the apostles play within this passage?